

### **The Sustainability Dilemma: Essays on British Columbia Forest and Environmental History**

By Robert Griffin and Richard A. Rajala. 2017. Royal BC Museum. 448 pages, 34.95 CAD, Paper.

Part of the Royal BC Museum (RBCM) catalogue, the meticulously researched *Sustainability Dilemma* examines British Columbia's (BC's) questionable implementation of post Second World War sustained-yield forestry and multiple-use resource policies. Despite the book's title, the authors do not dwell on sustainability theories; rather, they maintain their focus on negotia-

tions and conflict inherent in the BC Forest Service's execution of "sustained yield" in a system of industrial forestry. In the immediate post-war era, the forest was considered a farm growing a perpetual crop of trees from which to derive revenue. The best way to manage such imagined farms thus became a pressing question, as strategies pursued would either help or harm a range

of social and environmental interests. The book begins with Griffin's three-chapter essay that investigates the emergence of sustained yield policies and then those same policies in action. In the second part, Rajala pens two case studies on the conflicts which arose between those attempting to maximize forests and fish. Collectively, the essays discover and analyze rich new archival sources and so extend BC's forest history literature.

Both contributing authors have longstanding relationships with the museum. Both authors also have a tremendous depth of knowledge regarding BC's forest history. Dr. Robert Griffin served as the RBCM history curator for more than 30 years and has written many articles on the forest and mining industries. His most recent output includes *Stewards of the People's Forests: A Short History of the British Columbia Forest Service* (with fellow curator Lorne Hammond; 2014, RBCM). Dr. Richard Rajala is an associate professor of History at the University of Victoria, and a Research Associate at the RBCM. Prior to the volume under review, Rajala's previous book was another fine museum publication, 2006's *Up-Coast: Forests and Industry on British Columbia's North Coast, 1870–2005* (2006, RBCM).

Griffin's shorter three-chapter essay begins the book. Chapter 1, starts in the late 1940s and ends in the late 1970s. Through the period a sustained-yield policy was implemented and thought to be functioning somewhat satisfactorily, despite the forest bureaucracy's inability to shift policies and procedures fast enough to match community expectations. Chapter 2 examines industry responses to the overwhelming task of implementing sustained-yield policies, as represented by an in-depth study of the central-interior company Western Plywood (later known as Weldwood and then West Fraser). This eye-opening material portrays simultaneous cooperation and competition between smaller operators as they sought to manage the provincial timber sales process themselves, via collusion, rather than the Forest Service's bidding practice. Collusion occurred within very specific limits, duplicating similar European industry cartels of the 1890s. Griffin places blame for timber shortages on operator greed and government policy, not Forest Service incompetence as has sometimes been suggested in other unnamed studies. Finally, Chapter 3 explores the major policy changes that sought to maximize use of the resource by minimizing sawmill waste. What waste could not be avoided was redirected as an input for pulp and paper mills.

Griffin sticks very close to the archives, with minimal wider contextualization; almost all of the references are to primary sources with very few to the allied supporting secondary literature. Pace through time was fairly quick, which meant a fast parade-past of individuals, companies, and locations. This would tend to make it a narrative for insiders, rather than the uninitiated. So structured, the text demands some degree of existing knowledge of both logging and forestry; for

example, the purpose of planer mills is assumed rather than explained (p. 10). At the outset, the narrative is related from the Forest Service's point of view, rather than politicians, industry, or labour; this changes in the later chapters, which are told from the viewpoint of a particular company. There are many interesting images, though they are left to speak for themselves and were not contextualized as well as they might have been.

The much larger portion of the book is devoted to Rajala's two themed case studies. Both explore the constitutionally-rooted conflicts between provincial forest managers' aspirations to maximize the harvest of wood, and the competing aims of federal fisheries managers and proto-environmentalists who sought to safeguard the spawning habitat of salmon, prized by the commercial fishery, and trout, highly valued by the recreational rod and gun clubs. Chapter 4 provides a very close reading of the Stellako River controversy as it unfolded between 1950 and 1970. In short, this is a local story with national significance, one of "the grandest and most destructive traditions of North American lumbering—the river drive" (p. 121). Conservation discourse of the time suggested that when science was combined with the regulatory power of the State to pursue sustainable practices, conflicts could be resolved via the philosophy of multiple-use. Rajala does a good job of reminding the reader that such an outlook did not imply an equality of uses. The BC forest industry's pre-eminence as a generator of revenues and jobs meant that its requirements more often than not ranked first in the hierarchy. The result being that log drives were allowed on the Stellako, and logs gouged gravel spawning beds and shed tree bark that covered what fish habitat remained. Writer and conservationist Roderick Haig-Brown and fishing-resort owner and anti-log-drive crusader Doug Kelly emerge as heroes of this story, highlighting the environmental leadership provided by sportsmen during the 1960s.

The book's fifth and final chapter turns from the interior to the north coast. One theme that unites Rajala's two cases is the role of science and, more importantly, scientific uncertainty, exploited by capital and the province, to urge inaction with regards to protecting fish spawning habitat in the light of competing resource uses. Here, Riley Creek on Haida Gwaii is the site of higher elevation logging that some feared would result in devastating landslides, slope failures that indeed did occur depositing tonnes of material in the watercourse. This is another story of power and control, with losers such as federal fisheries officer Jim Hart and Haida fisherman Charlie Bellis, and short-term winners like BC Forests Minister Tom Waterland and QC Timber. Rajala insightfully observes that no one won in the end, because those with power wielded it in ways that led to their own ultimate embarrassment (p. 335). Those who thought they had won by successfully advocating for logging practices with unknown risks ultimately assured their loss in subsequent Haida Gwaii land use

conflicts. Multiple-use forestry became increasingly discredited, along with the sustained-yield concept, legitimizing a zoning concept of conflict resolution, parks, and a postponement of “meeting the full range of human needs in truly sustainable ways” (p. 335).

Rajala provides a great quantity of fine-grained detail, having scoured every available source and included it in the narrative and notes. The job of deciding what was of greater and lesser importance is left to the reader, a strategy that will limit the potential audience for this important scholarship. For both Chapters 4 and 5, synthesis and contextualization are saved for concluding sections, important larger-scale insights that may have been more profitably shared, or at least alluded to, in the introduction of both pieces, or invoked throughout in a more condensed telling.

In sum, this is an important book by subject matter experts that goes a great distance to understanding BC resource conflicts from the latter half of the 20th cen-

ture. The essays demand a lot of the reader and are far more specific than the general title would suggest. The layperson might be attracted to the topic but these essays will be most welcome by those already well-familiar with the details of British Columbia’s forest industry. The neophyte might more profitably begin with political scientist Jeremy Wilson’s 1998 *Talk and Log* (UBC Press), historian Gordon Hak’s 2006 *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry* (UBC Press), or even some of Rajala’s own previous books. For those more familiar with the field, *The Sustainability Dilemma* charts new archival ground and builds a strong foundation for further work in late 20th century human-environment relations. Perhaps its greatest contribution is in pointing a path forward to understanding the origins of the modern BC environmental movement.

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